

The hairy family of Burma: a four generation pedigree of congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa

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SUMMARY

A Burmese family with congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa had an eventful history in the nineteenth century. The earlier members of this family were employed at the court of Ava, but the later ones spent their lives in show business, being widely exhibited for money in the 1880s. Their extraordinary hairiness attracted much curiosity, and they were photographed several times. The hairy Burmese are the only example of a four-generation pedigree of congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa, which is consistent with an autosomal dominant mode of inheritance. There is good evidence that, when the members of this family were hairy, their dentition was also deficient.

SHWE-MAONG

The long history of the hairy Burmese family begins in 1826 with a visit of a mission of the Governor-General of India, led by John Crawfurd, to the court of the King of Ava, a province of Burma. In a published account of this mission, Crawfurd, who later in life earned a reputation as a distinguished naturalist and anthropologist, described meeting a 30-year-old hairy man named Shwe-Maong¹. At the age of 5, he had been given to the King by the local chief of his district and, since then, had lived within the palace as a curiosity and court entertainer. He was very clever in acting the buffoon, dancing, and making the most terrible grimaces. Shwe-Maong stated that his parents were perfectly normal and that none of his tribesmen was hairy. When he was 22, having attained puberty only 2 years previously, a wife was chosen for him by the King from the beautiful women in his retinue. There were four children, all girls, of this union. Two of them died at an early age, and a third was the very image of her mother. Only one child was abnormal, a girl named Maphoon, depicted on the left of her father in Crawfurd's picture (Figure 1) and resembling an elderly bearded man. Crawfurd states that the father never had more than two incisors and the two canines in the upper jaw, and four incisors and one canine in the lower jaw. Importantly, because it seems to eliminate the possibility that the other teeth simply failed to erupt, he says that 'where teeth were missing, the alveolar process was missing also'.

MAPHOON

In 1855, a second mission visited Ava, this time reported by Captain Henry Yule, who described Maphoon (Figure 2), now 31 years of age, married to a normal Burmese and mother of two boys². Her father had been murdered by robbers some years previously, and she had been brought up in the King's household. The story told of her marriage arranged by the King who had offered a reward to any man who was willing to marry her. Finally, an individual who was bold or avaricious enough ventured forth. Yule's description of Maphoon is so adequate and such a good



Figure 1 Shwe-Maong, the King's favourite, and his 3-year-old daughter Maphoon

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example of descriptive English that it deserves to be quoted verbatim:

The whole of Maphoon's face was more or less covered with hair. On a part of the cheek, and between the nose and mouth, this was confined to short down, but over all the rest of the face was a thick silky hair of a brown colour, paling about the nose and chin, four or five inches long. At the alae of the nose, under the eye, and on the cheekbone, this was very fully developed, but it was in and on the ear that it was most extraordinary. . . . The hair over her forehead was brushed so as to blend with the hair of the head, the latter being dressed (as usual with her countrywomen), *à la Chinoise*. It was not so thick as to conceal altogether the forehead. The nose, densely covered with hair as no animal's is that I know of, and with long fine locks curving out and pendent like the wisps of a fine Skye terrier's coat, had a most strange appearance. The beard was pale in colour, and about four inches in length, seemingly very soft and silky.

Her dentition consisted of a few incisors only; the canine teeth and grinders were absent, and the back parts of the gum merely a hard ridge.

MAPHOON'S PROGENY

Maphoon's elder son, about 4–5 years of age, was not abnormal, although it was noted that by the age of 14 years he seemed to have become more hairy than his younger brother. This brother, aged 14 months, and seated on his mother's lap in Figure 2, had tufts of long silky hair growing from his ears, a description which corresponds closely to the childhood state of the grandfather who later became so hairy. It is interesting that Yule comments that, had the great Barnum heard of Maphoon, he would surely have wished to bring her to Europe. In 1868, some photographs, taken a year earlier, of Maphoon and her two sons were shown in London by Captain Houghton. This gentleman had not seen the hairy people himself, but commissioned a photographer in Rangoon to take their pictures. By this time, Maphoon was 44 years of age and her sons were 18 and 14 years old. Through the good offices of the Captain's brother, the Rev Houghton of Wellington Salop, these photographs were forwarded to Dr Hermann Beigel³, who used them in a scientific article. Another photograph of Maphoon and her sons as a group was reproduced by Le Double and Houssay⁴; it is based on a photograph that is still kept in the Musée de l'Homme, Paris. The details of the dress are so similar to the figures in Houghton's photographs of 1868 that it can be assumed that they were taken on the same occasion. This is important because the family group includes a non-hairy Burmese, possibly Maphoon's husband and the father of the two boys, a speculation strengthened by the position of the arm of the older boy, which is resting across the shoulders of the turbaned man.

In 1875, another photographic record (Figure 3) appeared in an article in the French journal *La Nature*⁵; the

hairy family was discussed before the Anthropological Society of Paris in the same year⁶. It is stated to depict Shwe-Maong seated on a stool, his daughter Maphoon on a chair, and his grandson behind. However, this cannot be correct because, according to Yule's convincing account, Shwe-Maong was murdered before 1855. Furthermore, the figure behind is in female dress. The French teratologist Boulet⁷, who also reproduced this figure, identified the hairy Burmese as Maphoon, her son Moungh-Phoset, and her daughter Mah-Mé. Moungh-Phoset would have been about 21–25 years of age at this time, depending on which of Maphoon's two sons he was. No other account of this time refers to more than one son; it seems likely that one of them had died between 1867 and 1875. According to Yule and others, Maphoon did not have a living daughter. Instead, there is good evidence that Moungh-Phoset had a daughter named Mah-Mé, who would have been 7 years old at the time of the photograph. It seems highly probable that the members of the family depicted in Figure 3 are Maphoon, her son Moungh-Phoset and her granddaughter Mah-Mé. Although the figure behind seems much too tall for a 7-year-old girl, close examination of an original print of the photograph made available at the British Museum (Natural History) suggests that the group is posed carefully on studio furniture, the son in front on a stool or step with his arm resting on a draped pillar, behind which the supposed

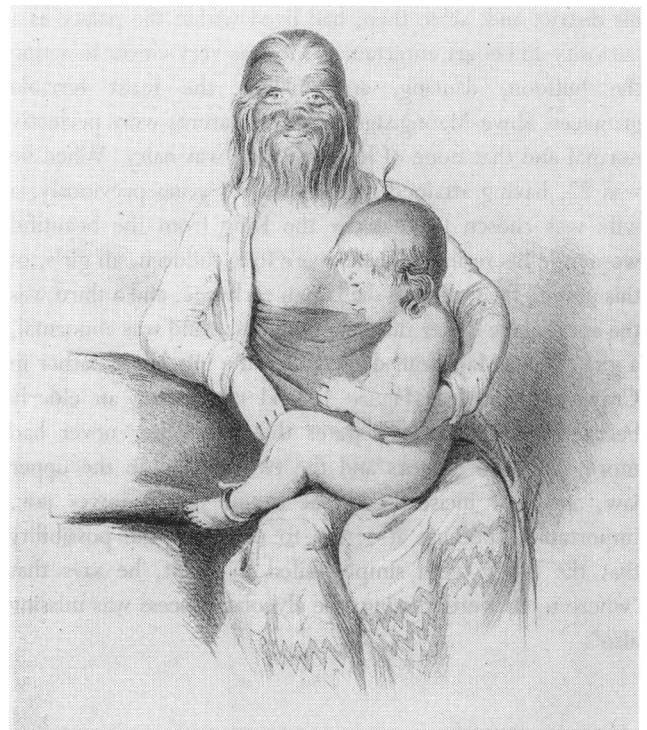


Figure 2 Maphoon at 31 years of age with her younger son (14 months) on her lap, long hair growing from his ear



Figure 3 Maphoon, MOUNG-PHOSSET and MAH-MÉ. The original Goss photograph from which the *La Nature* (1875) illustration was engraved

Mah-Mé is standing, possibly on a stool to facilitate the depiction of her hand. Care seems to have been taken to pose all three so that the hands can be seen, perhaps to demonstrate that the hands and feet were the only areas of the body free from long hair.

There are several photographs of Maphoon, alone or in a family group, in the possession of the British Museum (Natural History), associated with the name L. Allen Goss, and some correspondence. All seem to belong to the same period, and one is dated 1872. One reproduced here (Figure 4), showing Maphoon and two other hairy people and another normal Burmese, resembles the 1875 picture, although it was probably taken a few years earlier. Goss refers to the lively little girl in this picture, thereby strengthening the assumption that it is really a girl in Figure 3. If we assume that the chair on which her arm is resting has a seat 18 in. from the ground, her stature can be calculated as 3 ft 6 in. which is a little below the mean height for European girls aged 5 years. Thus, it seems likely that both photographs depict Mah-Mé, the daughter of MOUNG-PHOSSET. The identity of the non-hairy man standing behind in Figure 4 is uncertain. Goss refers to him as the 'elder brother' but it does not seem possible that he is a son of

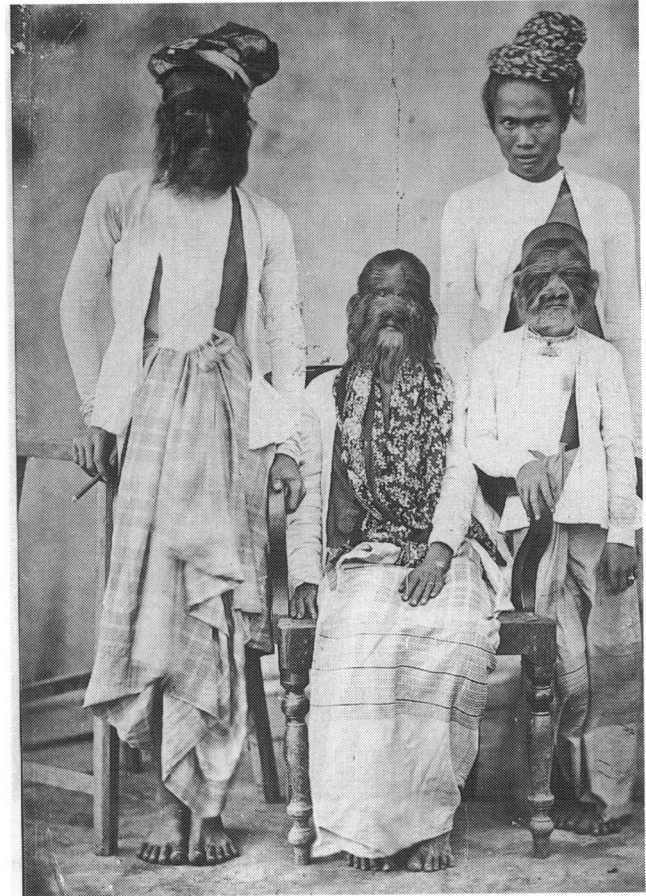
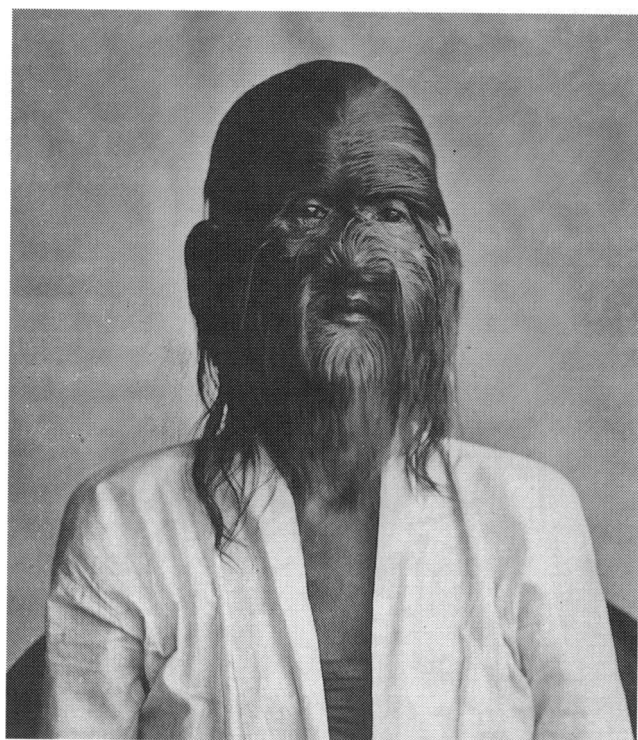


Figure 4 Maphoon, MOUNG-PHOSSET, MAH-MÉ and a normal relative, another of the Goss photographs

MOUNG-PHOSSET, who could not have been more than 25 years of age. Weir refers to a non-hairy nephew of Maphoon being photographed with the family at some time; it seems that Goss was not entirely clear about the relationships of the various members of the family, any more than he was about their ages, and that this is Maphoon's nephew. He may have been a son of Maphoon's elder surviving sister. Two other excellent photographs in the Goss collection (Figure 5a-b) depict Maphoon and MOUNG-PHOSSET in detail. Another photograph of Maphoon, resembling those of Goss except that she is dressed differently, is at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London. It seems possible that Maphoon was photographed frequently by visitors to Burma in the 1870s.

In 1885, there was a revolution in Burma, leading to the so-called Third Burmese War; the King's palace was set on fire and its inhabitants were driven away or killed. The hairy family managed to escape into a forest, MOUNG-PHOSSET carrying his fragile mother Maphoon on his back, followed by his wife and several children. An Italian officer, Captain Paperno, who had been a military advisor to the Burmese court, was sent out to rescue them. When the Italian found them he was astounded by their extraordinary appearance.

(a)



(b)



Figure 5 Close-ups of Maphoon (a) and Moungh-Phoset (b) from the Goss photographs. Like Figures 3 and 4, these are reproduced with permission from the British Museum (Natural History)

He suggested that the hairy Burmese should make a tour of Europe, being exhibited for money. Together with a fellow-countryman, Mr Farini, the Captain, who was himself without employment after the gutting of the Burmese court, decided to act as their impresario. Before the hairy Burmese left for Europe, Moungh-Phoset's daughter Mah-Mé died at the age of 18. During the summer of 1886, the family appeared at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, where they were seen by Mr J J Weir⁸. He described Maphoon as a blind old woman, lively and full of fun, and an inveterate chewer of betel in spite of her few teeth. He suspected that her hairy growth had thinned somewhat due to age, as Moungh-Phoset had much more hair on the face and ears. He certainly presented a grotesque appearance, his entire features being hidden by the hair, which he combed over his face. Moungh-Phoset's entire body was clothed with soft hair some inches in length, which he had cut from time to time; furthermore, he was tattooed from below the waist to above the knees. In spite of his bizarre exterior, Weir described Moungh-Phoset as a well-educated and decent man. Importantly, he also stated that the hair of both Maphoon and Moungh-Phoset was soft, wavy and of a brownish colour, quite unlike the hair of an ordinary Burmese. Captain Paperno, the family's impresario, informed Weir that, although the dentition of all the hairy people was deficient, their non-hairy relatives

all had perfect teeth. Mr Weir examined a cast of Moungh-Phoset's mouth, finding in the upper jaw two canines and two large incisors, and in the lower jaw two canines and four small incisors; the molar and premolar teeth were all absent.

From London the Burmese went on to Paris, where they appeared at the Folies-Bergère. The French anthropologist Guyot-Daubès saw them there in 1887, and obviously also obtained an interview with their impresario⁹. He told a remarkable story about Shwe-Maong's marriage. A beautiful young Burmese lady of high birth, a lady in waiting to the Queen, had committed a crime against religion and was sentenced to be tortured to death in the most horrible way, at the churchyard of her dead ancestors. Just when the dreadful ceremony was about to start, a courtier rode up to offer her a pardon if she agreed to marry the court buffoon. After due consideration, she accepted the offer. The marriage ceremony was a ludicrous and degrading spectacle, as Shwe-Maong was joined by a veritable congress of dwarfs, albinos, idiots and jesters. It is odd that Crawford's original account did not mention this remarkable occurrence; it might have been a figment of Captain Paperno's imagination in order to make his hairy charges' life-stories even more interest-filled. Like his grandfather, Moungh-Phoset had married one of the maids of honour at the court, this time one who chose him of her own free will. Mah-Mé was their

only daughter. Guyot-Daubès⁹ reproduced photographs of both Maphoon and Moug-Phoset. According to Gould and Pyle¹⁰, the hairy Burmese even went to the USA during their world tour. Drimmer¹¹ adds that their stage name was the 'Sacred Hairy Family of Burma'. They were included in the collection of the photographer Charles Eisenmann¹², but from a comparison with the Goss photographs it can be deduced that Eisenmann's pictures were copies of earlier ones, and were not taken in his own studio. The hairy Burmese are depicted in the thorough work of Durant and Durant¹³, but with no indication that they were ever on show in the USA. The ultimate fate of Maphoon and Moug-Phoset is unknown; probably they went back to Burma and died in obscurity there.

We agree with the earlier writers who have classified the hairy Burmese as having the autosomal dominant syndrome congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa¹⁴⁻¹⁶. The annals of this syndrome stretch far back into time. The earliest case was the celebrated Petrus Gonzales, who was born in the Canary Isles in 1556. Like the hairy Burmese, he had long soft hair

all over his body. His life-story resembles that of Shwe-Maong: he was taken to the court of the French King Henry II as a curiosity, married there and had several children, all of whom inherited the same form of hairiness. At least one of them transmitted the disease into a third generation^{17,18}. Subsequently, there have been about 50 unrelated cases of this syndrome¹⁵. Some authors have divided individuals with congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa into 'dog-faced' and 'monkey-faced' groups^{19,20}, but these terms are both uncouth and erroneous. We have recently shown that Julia Pastrana, who was perhaps the most famous of all hairy people and who was for long considered typical of the 'monkey-faced' group, in fact suffered from congenital hypertrichosis with terminal hair and gingival hyperplasia²¹. It is reasonable to propose that the few other individuals in the so-called 'monkey-faced' group of congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa also had this syndrome. Only the 'dog-faced' individuals, with true lanugo hair, should be classified as having congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa.

The hairy family of Burma is the only example of a four-generation pedigree (Figure 6) of congenital hypertrichosis lanuginosa. This pedigree is consistent with an autosomal dominant mode of inheritance. There is very good evidence that, when there was hairiness, the dentition was also deficient. These two characteristics appear to be components of the same syndrome.

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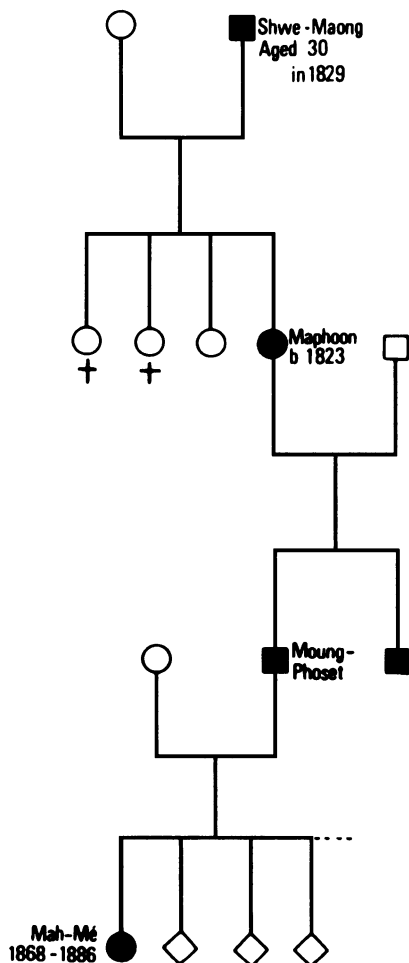


Figure 6 A pedigree of the hairy Burmese

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